

Intellectual Courage in the Face of Intractable Normative Disagreement

Dissertation Abstract

Ordinary folks disagree all the time about normative matters such as ethics, politics, and epistemology (what it makes sense to believe)—always have, always will. It would be nice if we could just defer to the people who study these matters for a living and have them settle our disputes, as we often can with scientific matters that are controversial among ordinary folks (e.g., controversy about the age of the Earth, climate change, the safety/harmfulness of vaccines). But philosophers disagree like crazy, too—always have, probably always will. That’s especially troubling. If the people who study these matters for a living come to all sorts of different conclusions, despite their best efforts to discover the truth, then how can anyone justifiably believe that their own views are correct? Maybe there’s something defective about our methods of normative inquiry (an epistemological worry). Maybe there are no normative truths at all (a metaphysical worry). Or perhaps our normative judgments are really just expressions of non-cognitive attitudes such as feelings of (dis)approval, goals, or desires, rather than beliefs that aim to represent normative reality (a semantic worry since it’s about the *meaning* of our normative judgments). Any of these hypotheses would go some distance toward explaining the long history of intractable normative disagreement in philosophy. So what attitude should we take toward our own (often dearly held) normative views in light of these considerations? And if we conclude that we *ought* to take a skeptical attitude, won’t we have reached a normative conclusion that is highly controversial? And won’t we have reached it on the basis of normative reasoning—reasoning about what is *rational*, or *justified*, given the evidence? How can we coherently reason to the conclusion that we *ought* to think that even our best reasoning about normative matters is no good?

These are questions I attempt to answer in my dissertation “Intellectual Courage in the Face of Intractable Normative Disagreement”. It consists of four papers. In the first three, I argue that recent metaphysical, epistemological, and semantic challenges to ordinary moral belief that rely on appeals to intractable normative disagreement (especially among philosophers) fail. I take these three papers to defeat the supposed defeaters to ordinary normative belief presented by arguments from disagreement in metaethics. But, even if I’m correct about all of this, we’re still left wondering what we ought to think about the justification of our own normative views in light of all this intractable disagreement. In the fourth paper, I explain how, even in these epistemically hostile times, we can sometimes be justified (both epistemically and morally) in holding on to our deepest normative views. Here’s a more detailed outline.

1. In **“The Self-Undermining Arguments from Disagreement”** (forthcoming in *Oxford Studies in Metaethics*) I argue that recent metaphysical and epistemological challenges to our moral beliefs self-undermine because they employ premises that are at least as controversial among the relevant parties as the normative claims such arguments are intended to discredit.
2. In **“Can We Rationally Believe Conciliationism?”** (under review), I argue that recent attempts to defend Conciliationism, a popular view in the epistemology of peer disagreement, against its well-known self-undermining problem are not successful and that the problem is unlikely to be fixed given its structure.
3. In **“The Semantic (In)significance of Fundamental Normative Disagreement”** (full draft), I argue that semantic challenges intended to vindicate expressivism or co-reference failure about normative discourse overgeneralize. If they succeed, they would, contrary to what their proponents argue, vindicate global expressivism (i.e., expressivism about *all* apparently descriptive discourse) or global co-reference failure, which is deeply implausible.
4. Finally, in **“Intellectual Courage in the Face of Intractable Normative Disagreement”** (full draft), I diagnose the problem with arguments for agnosticism about our controversial normative views that depend on appeals to intellectual humility. I argue that just as humility is constrained by courage in the practical domain (e.g., if you’re an able-bodied adult, it’s not humble to refuse to jump into a pool to save a drowning child on the grounds that you’re “not a strong swimmer”, it’s cowardly) so humility is constrained by courage in the epistemic domain (e.g., it’s not intellectually humble to believe you have no hands just because a smart philosopher argues that you don’t, it’s intellectually cowardly). I develop an account of intellectual courage, an oft-neglected virtue of the mind concerned with epistemic risk and caution. It lies in a mean between intellectual cowardice and intellectual recklessness. The intellectual coward is unduly epistemically cautious and not sufficiently concerned with believing the truth, while the intellectually reckless person is unduly credulous and not sufficiently concerned with avoiding error. Both fail to respect the truth appropriately (just as the morally cowardly and reckless persons fail to respect the good appropriately). And just as there are some practical goods for which it’s worth risking your practical welfare, there are, I argue, intellectual goods for which it’s worth risking your intellectual welfare (i.e., risking being wrong). Thus, I argue, intellectual courage often permits (and sometimes requires) taking risks for the sake of great moral and intellectual goods. Those who always abandon their normative beliefs because (due to disagreement from excellent philosophers) they’re worried they might get things wrong display intellectual cowardice—excessive concern for falling into error. I argue that the prospect of the great intellectual and moral goods secured by having true normative belief is sometimes worth the risk of being mistaken.